

# Research in Public Administration

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PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION like library and information science, is an applied social science. It is as difficult to define and as diverse as library and information science. Like library and information science, it is relatively new in its current broad scope and its content is in a period of rapid change. Before looking at research in public administration as a source of information for library and information science research, the groundwork needs to be laid. This includes a brief overview of the discipline called public administration and a comparison of that discipline with one called library and information science. Then it will be possible to look at research in public administration, its development and present status, to see how findings relate directly to needs and issues in library and information science. Finally we will predict the future direction of public administration research and estimate what direct applications it may have for library and information science research.

## Definition of Public Administration

Public administration has been called many things; a subset of political science or at least its offspring, a process of government that has been formalized into a discipline, and even a subject matter in search of a discipline. Public administration is a process and as such has been around as long as governments have existed. As a discipline, it is

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primarily an American idea that grew out of the late nineteenth-century movement for government reform, the scientific management theories of Frederick Taylor et al. and the new discipline of political science.<sup>1</sup> It has a relationship to political science in that its field of endeavor is the body politic, but where political scientists look at the political aspect of an activity, public administrators deal with the implementation of policy. They are administrators who operate in the public sector and are involved in all of those activities that are necessary for the smooth operation of departments, programs and activities that are the outcomes of policy decisions made by the bodies politic. Public administration may be more profession than discipline, in that it combines theory and practice and is both science and art.

Public administration differs from business administration in that it functions in the public not-for-profit sector, and decision-making derives from policy set by legislative or administrative action rather than from the profit motive. Although much of the activity of the public administrator is similar to that of the business administrator, major differences exist in the purpose of the activity being administered, the sources of funding, and the types of accountability.

Formal education for public administration was part of the French system in the eighteenth century where professional schools were developed to provide qualified technicians for public service. The tradition of a strong civil service was modified in the American setting by the party system of government. A group skilled in carrying out the policies and programs of governments is present at each level of government in the United States. Since the 1930s, public administration has become more than carrying out policies and has come to include the development of policies to foster and maintain public growth.<sup>2</sup>

After World War II, public administrators went through a period of self-doubt and self-criticism. For many of them, being good policy implementers and managers was no longer enough. Theoretical questions concerning the discipline, if it in fact was a discipline, were posed. The scope of their role and concerns changed from that of being responsible for the traditional planning, organizing, staffing, reviewing, and budgeting activities to a much broader charge. Public administrators realized that study of the organization should encompass the study of human behavior and study of budgeting should include the study of theory as well as practice. Public administrators became aware of interconnections between science and technology and between policy and administration.

This change in viewpoint, which was a response to social and technological change, poses problems in outlining the intellectual boundaries of public administration. Administration of activity in the public sector is still at the core, but the full implications of this work are not fully recognized. The concern of the 1930s with budgets became, in the 1960s, work with the development of techniques for analyzing costs and benefits of programs. This is only one indication of the shift in public administration away from structures and processes and toward systems analysis. The human relations movement of the 1930s became, by the 1970s, an interest in organizational development. The basic activities of administration have been enriched by moving further out into those areas of concern and beyond the how to the why. This is not a universal trend among public administrators, some of whom would prefer to leave questions of theory and definition of profession alone and be allowed to do their work in peace. For the most part, however, these shifts of interest indicate that the time of the generalist public administrator is waning and the period of the specialist is arriving. What still holds this discipline or profession together as its members continue to move out in different directions is its philosophy of public service.

As it is currently practiced, public administration can be defined by the following functions:

1. Establishment of objectives and priorities.
2. Development of operational plans.
3. Organizing and staffing.
4. Directing.
5. Controlling.
6. Dealing with external units of the organization.
7. Dealing with independent organizations.
8. Dealing with the press and public.<sup>3</sup>

Overlay this with the research implications of each function such as the study of how decisions are made, the study of the implications of work restructuring, the search for efficiency, the identification of hidden costs, and the study of client groups and their interaction with public programs and a definition of public administration as a scholarly discipline begins to emerge.

### **Similarities to Library and Information Science**

Library and Information Science and Public Administration have a number of commonalities which make the research in one field useful to

those in the other. Both are applied social sciences, both operate in a multiplicity of environments, and both provide services that enhance the activities of others such as implementing policy or providing necessary information. As library and information science has developed in the past several decades, it has moved, like public administration, from an emphasis on how to do a specific job to a broader view of the role of information and information service in society. In both disciplines, the view of what is important to know and to investigate has expanded, and in similar terms. Librarians need to have a greater understanding of organizational structure, systems analysis, the behavioral aspects of internal management, and relationships with client groups.

The division between those who wish to explore librarianship in its widest definition and those who want to be left alone to be librarians has its parallel in public administration. The self-scrutiny of our performance and profession and the over-involvement in self-study, the problem of self-definition in a period of rapid change, and the sense that we are on the threshold of coming into our own characterize both professions. We both have the experience of seeing other disciplines reinventing our research and not being aware that they are doing so—e.g., those in applied anthropology in their study of organizations and those in computer science investigating the nature of information. Both are complex professions with so many facets that we have difficulty defining the scope of what we are and do. Often the specialist in one discipline is closer to the specialist in the other than to members of the same discipline, e.g., personnel officer to personnel officer or budget officer to budget officer. It is in these specialist areas where our activities are often similar and where library and information science can benefit most from being knowledgeable about research being conducted in public administration.

### **Research Themes**

There is a convergence among several of the social sciences in interests, in research materials, and to a large extent in value orientation. People have fundamental similarities, and findings in one area concerning motivation, group dynamics, learning, etc. are the same or similar regardless of whether the research is done in public administration, library and information science, or related disciplines. There is often too little communication between and among disciplines in their research and in the dissemination of that research. The overlapping and often vague boundaries that separate disciplines provide the opportunity and indeed indicate a need for outward communication.

Research themes in public administration tend to follow practice rather than determine it. Much research is evaluative rather than basic. This is important for the improvement of operations but does not break new ground.<sup>4</sup> One major thrust over the past decade has been the emphasis on behavioral research, from the review of personnel structures to a concern for motivation and analysis of leadership potential. Another has been in the area of policy analysis. Some general areas of research cover several aspects of public administration while others are specific to a process. Those that are more general in nature will be reviewed in this article followed by those that are specific to a particular aspect of public administration. Finally, an analysis of the doctoral dissertations completed in the past six years will provide an indication of the attention given by researchers to the various aspects of public administration. Each of the areas of research have aspects that are easily applied to the management of libraries and information centers and to their clientele.

### **Innovation**

Among the more comprehensive studies in the field are those dealing with innovation. The National Science Foundation, Division of Policy Research and Analysis funded a study of the life histories of six types of innovation. Nineteen locations where innovative activities (such as Computer-Assisted Instruction) were being carried out made up the sample. "Old innovations" were identified so that their life cycle could be studied. This long-term investigation of organizational events was necessary to determine the steps needed for an innovation to become routinized. Researchers found that for an innovation to become a routine, it passes through a series of cycles; improvisation, expansion, disappearance, success, and then full routinization. They found that an innovation must gain increased support from agency practitioners and does so only if it makes their work easier.<sup>5</sup>

### **Organizational Development and Change**

Recent studies of organizational development and change have dealt with three themes: kinds of change, adaptation to change and organization of change. Five kinds of change have been identified: planned change, confluence of forces, event-dominated change, accidental innovation, and external intervention.<sup>6</sup> Those studying adaptation to change have investigated the change process from a number of views: (1) the external conditions which influence change—such as the

introduction of technology; (2) the behavioral aspects of change; and (3) the organizational or structural aspects of change. These factors are intertwined and although one may be the focus of the study, the others will, to some extent, be included. Study of technological change includes the design and evaluation of MIS (Management Information Systems), the behavioral aspects of learning to use the new technology and the restructuring of the organization to accommodate new ways of obtaining information and completing tasks. Study of the behavioral aspects of change includes examination of the planning, implementation and evaluation of activities intended to increase efficiency and productivity. It also includes analysis of the impact on the organization of group decision-making as a means of bringing about change.

Much of the research dealing with change strategy is oriented toward studying group activities and ways to structure groups that will result in improved performance. One form of organizational development is the interdisciplinary approach to problem solving—sometimes called the study team approach. As an example, library services could be reviewed from a number of vantage points. A committee or interagency task force representing recreation, the planning department, personnel, the budget office, and other relevant departments would review the entire library/information program and its present and potential contributions to the community rather than looking at it as a separate, perhaps isolated, entity. This program approach to governmental issues was tried in Dayton, Ohio and was found to have numerous benefits. It is analogous to program budgeting in which a program-oriented rather than a line-item oriented approach is taken. This program-oriented approach provides new lines of communication among agencies and has the potential of changing the way in which organizations function.<sup>7</sup>

Another organizational design, the matrix organization, differs somewhat from the study team. In the matrix organization, each person belongs to two working groups, thus assuring integration of activity and continuous communication. The study team, an ad hoc group, is assigned a specific task. Integration and communication of activities are expected but are not built into the plan, as is the case with the matrix organization. The matrix structure, developed in the 1960s as part of the space effort, draws staff from throughout the organization to meet a specific need. In New York City during a sanitation strike, a matrix-structured crisis team of members from the finance, fire, police, general services, and sanitation departments was set up. This technique—analogue to program budgeting in the financial area—has been used

in the private sector with considerable success, and further possibilities for its use in the public sector are being explored.<sup>8</sup>

At the level of the individual in the organization, research on the role of the manager in dealing with change has focused on educating the manager, on the effects of self-renewal on the individual, and on the ways in which the manager can work with the organization to effect its renewal. The role of the consultant as change agent has received attention as well.

### **Decision-Making and Decision Evaluation**

Studies of decision-making have gained in popularity and tend to focus on the question of how can we do the job better (productivity). How can services be provided at high quality and at the lowest possible cost? How do we determine the actual cost of programs? What are the program alternatives? What long-term changes result from the application of certain policies, programs and measures?

The use of productivity measures to aid in decision-making is of considerable interest to researchers, and the federal government has been heavily involved in productivity measurement. Relatively few federal and state governments are satisfied with the productivity measures they have been using and are looking at new ways of measuring input-output ratios. In the 1950s, a popular measure was to relate the amount of work accomplished to number of employee hours or dollars expended. After a period of being out of favor, this measure is again being used.<sup>9</sup> In the case of library services, the federal productivity measure was items loaned. This is only one measure and is generally recognized to be inadequate. It illustrates why there is a need to look at what output measures are selected and what quality and levels-of-service measures are chosen. One means of dealing with the problem is to set work standards and then measure activity against them.

Studies of productivity have ranged from the identification and application of measures, to the behavioral aspects of data collection, to the decision-making processes that are or may be dependent upon the results of applying the measure. Data collection in public service activities is often difficult, largely because it is not always possible to anticipate the workload. One can more easily set input measures for entering records into OCLC—as there is some control over workload—than is possible for measuring patron requests at the public service desk—where there is little or no control over the workload. Because some areas of activity are easier to measure, they tend to receive the most attention, leaving large numbers of less-easily measured activities unmeasured or

poorly measured. In collecting productivity data, problems arise because of the lack of comparative data among departments and between governments. There is often little comparative data over time even in the same department. This same difficulty exists among public libraries in their statistics keeping. As agencies—including libraries—are increasingly expected to justify costs, the need for interagency comparable input-output data continues to grow.

### **Personnel**

The scientific management studies and attitudes toward work that shaped the individual to meet the job demands gave way to a human relations approach in the 1930s. There now appears to be a third level of job design thinking that combines both the demands of the job and the interests of the individual with the technology of the 1970s and 1980s to become socio-technical job design and organization. Although preliminary studies have been conducted—largely in other disciplines—much work still needs to be done in order to understand the impact of automation and computer technology—as well as other advanced technologies—on the work place. The requirement that some tasks be done for long periods with the computer terminal has elements of Taylor's scientific management approach. The emphasis on inputting so many units within a time period is reminiscent of Gilbreth's time-and-motion studies, while job redesign to take human needs into account is more reflective of the 1930s. Add to these concerns the studies of job redesign to meet the social concerns of the 1960s with the emphasis on job enrichment, employee satisfaction and feedback mechanisms. The most recent layer is redesign of the job to meet the demands of technology. This is an area of particular interest to those responsible for the management of libraries and other information activities. The introduction of automated systems has changed the structure of activities within the library. It has changed the activities of individuals and groups. Designing jobs by considering the needs of the individual and the organization without regressing to the assembly line mentality of Taylor is an important area of research to those in public administration and in librarianship.

Other areas of concern in personnel research are related to community concerns and socio-political developments. Pressure from minority groups and women has led to evaluation of jobs in terms of comparability of worth among jobs. Minimum qualifications for positions and the needs to justify them are concerns of numerous public



agencies. Fairness in labor-management relations generally and in relation to affirmative action directives has also focused greater attention on job design and evaluation. Ethical conduct codes are being reviewed. Many of these changes have come about because of the influx of women into the labor force and their demands for fair treatment.

Librarianship has traditionally been a female dominated profession, and many traditional difficulties such as low compensation rates have been present for many years. Unlike many areas of public administration, which have been male dominated and have fairly small and relatively recent female populations, librarianship has a depressed personnel history in many respects. The study of librarianship in relation to other similar service professions such as public administration is an interesting area that would produce data on comparable worth of jobs. With the age of information upon us and with the changes in needs for information by individuals in all areas, the study of jobs, of comparability of worth in relation to information services would be of particular interest. Studies of leadership asking such questions as: What is a leader? What makes a good leader? and studies of participation in the organization, are also of current interest in public administration research.

### **Financial Concerns**

An area of public administration where research was extensive at one time but limited at present is in the area of budgeting of resources. During the period of program budgeting, performance budgeting and zero base budgeting, considerable attention was paid to the impact of these on planning of service. Recent research has been more apt to focus on the effects of these different types of budgeting on the organization's performance. The ways in which funds are spent, and what one receives in return have been reviewed at some length. One of the few new ideas in the financial area has been that of contracting for services. Public agencies have sold their parking lots and then rented them back; they have reduced their staff size and have hired special purpose consultants—the objectives being to reduce the cost of maintaining certain services or full-time positions when the services or personnel are needed only part time.<sup>10</sup> This is an activity full of potential (in savings) and pitfalls (with public service unions and other employee groups). It brings into question issues of relationships between the public and private sector that need further research. Much of the rest of the research in the financial area has been a recording of the impact of resource

scarcity on public finance and an investigation of possible new means of acquiring financing.

### **Marketing Approach to Service**

The tying of market research to public agency services is beginning to receive attention. Agencies are looking at the services they provide with a view to what the demand is or may be and they are looking at the extent to which services are provided in ways most preferred by the clientele.

Looking at public services from a marketing standpoint has brought citizens into the activities of public agencies in a new way. Studies of citizen participation in decision-making have been conducted for some time, with emphasis on the role of citizen groups in influencing both policy and its implementation. Characteristics of individual participants or of the group have been studied. Client groups, their level of satisfaction, and the dynamics of their interaction with agency personnel have also been observed. In the marketing mode these studies serve as a base, but there is a new emphasis on designing services to meet client wishes rather than waiting for complaints as a means of adjusting existing services. Measures of public service which include an evaluation of citizen satisfaction are being developed. A measure of satisfaction for police service was developed based on reported data and interviews; and the measure included variables that determine levels of satisfaction with services of the police department.<sup>11</sup>

This marketing approach was based on the assumption that local government officials must strike a balance between citizen demands and the city's or state's ability to pay. If the citizen wants a higher level of service than there is money to support, one answer is to involve the citizen in the activity through volunteer work, through coproduction of services, which involves both a paid employee and a volunteer, or through the self-service concept in which the clients do their own paperwork.

### **Dissertations in Public Administration**

Research patterns in public administration in the past several years reinforce statements made earlier in this discussion. Of the approximately one hundred dissertations annually dealing with public administration in the United States, the following patterns emerge.

In 1977, one-third of the 115 dissertations dealt in some way with personnel issues, while less than 10 percent were related to financial issues or to policy implementation. Most of the remaining dissertations were descriptions of particular programs in legal, health care, or environmental services. A few dealt with interagency cooperation and communications. Two dissertations, one on the confidentiality of data and another on the impact of computers on government, were related to information. The dissertations in the area of personnel focused on the role of the individual and on the design of organizations to meet human needs.

Research production in dissertations in 1978-79 followed a similar pattern with approximately one hundred dissertations per year, with personnel as the largest study area. Approximately 10 percent were related to financial issues or to policy implementation. The largest group of dissertations described programs, particularly in law and health and human services. A few studies of planning, evaluation and organizational development were done. Leadership, managerial styles and evaluation were common topics to personnel related study. The role of external interest groups in relation to public policy and public service was investigated as well. In 1980, 1981 and 1982 the pattern continues to hold with approximately one-third of the dissertations dealing with personnel concerns and less than 10 percent concerned with financial activities. The dissertation research production in public administration is heavily descriptive of programs and activities. The second emphasis is on personnel. Relatively little attention is devoted to financial considerations, or to organizational theory or to planning. Few studies of principles were conducted. No more than one or two dissertations in any one year focused on the impact of information and/or technology on public administration.

The major contribution of dissertation research in public administration to library and information science is in some of the personnel studies, the occasional study of information and technology in the public sector and the generalizable studies of innovation and change. Public administration is an applied social science and this is most evident as one reviews its dissertation research.

### **Future Research**

In the past, research in public administration was conducted in an environment of growth and of abundance of resources. Future public services will be managed in an environment of steady or reduced resour-

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ces. The infrastructure of roads, housing and public buildings is aging and needs repair. The infrastructure of communication is being altered radically and the telephone and mail services are being expanded and deregulated. The population is changing as the average age rises, and in response, public agencies will institute new or at least revised services. The effects of these changes on providing services and on demands for services are areas filled with research questions.

Knowledge is emerging as the critical factor in the way in which we do our work. New techniques of dealing with information have changed the power balance between those who have and those who do not have information. Availability of necessary information at the right time is critical to levels of productivity. In the past six years, no more than one or two dissertations focused on the impact of information and/or technology in public administration. While the shape of our knowledge base is changing, researchers have been studying the impact of specific programs. Both are important, but of prime importance is research on the changes in access to information and the uses of information in our information society.

Public and private sector activities were at one time fairly easy to define. That is less the case and the division between the two is becoming increasingly difficult to determine. The library as a public good is coming under scrutiny. Services provided by federal and state governments are now being claimed by private sector entrepreneurs who wish to sell the information at a cost much higher than it is being provided by public agencies. Many public agencies are looking at the possibility of contracting for service, and this continues to blur the difference between public and private sectors.

Research in innovation and change is necessary and will doubtless continue at least at a minimal level. There will continue to be a great deal of public administration research devoted to personnel issues, much of which will have useful implications for library and information science. In order to gain maximum benefit from such research, it needs to be communicated across disciplines. Those responsible for the management of libraries need to be aware of research in public administration and the ways in which its findings can be applied to research and practice in its own field.

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